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SOME PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS ON THE MAY 1997 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN INDONESIA

updated version

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The Indonesian parliamentary election of May 29 may be symptomatic of the state of Indonesian politics as a whole: on the surface, things looked fairly normal and functional, they also showed signs of the ultimate vulnerability of the system.

While the elections looked free on a superficial level, with lively and sometimes raucous campaign by three competing political parties for 425 seats in the legislature, this was hardly the case in reality. The two "opposition" parties -- the Islamic-identified United Development Party (PPP) and the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) -- were formed by the government back in 1973, and while they have at times shown some genuine independence, they both must subscribe to the official ideology of Pancasile, all candidates for parliament must be screened by military and quizzed about their political beliefs before they can be approved. It is illegal to criticize the government or oppose the president and only Golkar, the ruling party, is allowed to campaign down to the village level. In June 1996, the government engineered the overthrow of Megawati Sukarnoputri as head of the PDI, the leading opposition group, resulting in days of rioting and demonstrations.

No other political parties are allowed. The People's Democratic Party (PRD), for example, is a youthful organization

chairman is largely a manager. Golkar's only real strength as a party comes through organizing the bureaucracy and could never work as a regular party; many suspect it will crumble after Suharto. Golkar also maintains an essentially feudalistic structure of patronage and control. It has been said that the typical attenders at a Golkar rally are a bureaucrat, his extended family and his servants. Major businesses are a major source of support for Golkar, not just because of its pro-business policies, but that it would be very difficult to get necessary licenses otherwise. To support another party would be suicide. This contrasts with the business class in the Philippines, which eventually threw its support to the opposition of the Marcos regime because it was less dependent on the regime to operate. The government funds all three parties to a limited extent, but Golkar, with its close ties to government and business, has far more resources. There is little distinction between the party and government, with vast sums of money and resources being poured into Golkar far above the normal allocation passed out equally among the three parties.

It is well-known that a decent showing by an opposition party in your village or neighborhood could lead to your roads not being repaired, planned electrification suspended and other problems. As a result, there is little incentive to vote one's conscience, particularly since the overall voting is usually rigged and the legislature doesn't have any real political power anyway. Local Golkar and government officials, desiring

fairly accounted on the local level, they could easily be altered at election headquarters where oversight in severely limited and the military has direct access. Even before the election, official results for a particular region were leaked out several days prior to the actual vote. Indeed, during the May election, independent monitors found that unregistered persons were permitted to vote, there was multiple voting, there was discrimination in the treatment of voters, witnesses from the opposition party were forced to leave the polling stations, there were numerous incidents of violence and disruption near several polling stations, independent election monitors were not allowed to observe the election process and there were numerous other procedural irregularities.

The election campaign was far more restricted than five years ago, with outdoor rallies banned and other campaign activities limited. Yet, as the campaign evolved, the authorities allowed at least some demonstrations to occur. Five years ago, the worse problems were traffic jams in urban areas resulting from rallies and parades. This year, police efforts to break up such demonstrations deteriorated into major riots, resulting in more than 250 deaths. Still, the U.S. Embassy praised the Indonesian authorities for their restraint in suppressing the rioters. Despite the much smaller numbers participating in campaigns, the atmosphere was far more tense. The election was more watched and more violent. The most prominent clashes were between PPP supporters and Golkar

Christian backing) she has the support of a variety of key constituencies. Given her continued support of her father's authoritarian constitution, some people question whether she can be a strong moral voice for democracy, comparable to Aung San Soo Kyi of Burma. She has also thus far claimed only to be leader of the PDI, not of the pro-democracy movement in general. At the same time, she is seen as the single figure most likely to challenge Suharto and the military. Her twenty-page manifesto "Restoring Democracy, Justice and Order in Indonesia: An Agenda for Reform" demonstrates a level of sophistication and pluralism greater than many critics anticipated. After years of dismissing her as an insignificant figure, the regime ironically responded to her personal decision to not participate in the elections as irresponsible because of her mass following.

Her leadership of the PDI, and, more importantly, her ouster, was a political education for much of the population. The level of repression has created a kind of social struggle which has spread beyond the middle classes. The government has not granted more freedoms, but the people have seemed to taken them. Unfortunately, the growing realization of the repression has not necessarily led to greater political awareness, but anger at the repression, thus the periodic violent outbursts.

The PPP, which won 63 seats in the last election, was expected to gain substantially as the main opposition party, including support from those who do not identify with their Islamist orientation but who saw them as the only credible

nothing over the past five years that would increase its popular support, knowing that PDI without Megawati had virtually no following and knowing of the recent surge for PPP, expected that there would be massive fraud.

The government ended up allowing for a result which reflected the essential collapse of the PDI without Megawati, only showing a 3% vote. The PPP almost doubled its showing to 23%, with Golkar reflecting a 6% increase in their vote from five years ago. Most observers believe that such figures, while certainly padded to change the percentage points in Golkar's favor, may not have been too far off the mark from the actual tally. The major fraud apparently came from counting the large number of blank and spoiled ballots, entered in protest, and counting them as Golkar, thus not taking away from the totals of the opposition parties but greatly increasing the numbers of votes going to the ruling party. Indeed, it was the large numbers not voting for the three parties -- either by casting blank or spoiled ballots or abstaining from the polls altogether -- which was the most embarrassing result which the government sought to cover up. The increase in PPP totals appeared to be just enough to mollify them.

By acknowledging the collapse of the PDI without Megawati, the government has largely destroyed its carefully-developed three-party system. Particularly difficult for the regime is the fact that the only credible electoral opposition is Muslim-identified.

to see if they added up to the larger government-announced totals. As one KIPP official described it, "they will pretend to have and election and we will pretend to monitor it." Advisors were brought in from the Philippines, Bangladesh and other southeast Asian countries with experience in such grassroots initiatives. The Indonesian government was stunned by KIPP's success in its ability to hold together with such a large number of constituencies. While they were fairly mainstream in their politics, diverse, idealistic and often disorganized, the regime still saw them as a threat. Several of their volunteers were kidnapped by government security forces immediately prior to the election and harassment at the polls was widespread.

Even the United States embassy saw the election as a sham, but argued that the opposition parties do play a role is pushing the regime towards reform. They cite the ouster of Megawati, whose rising stature posed a potential future rival to Suharto himself, as an example of how even this flawed electoral system can pose a challenge to the authoritarian state. While acknowledging that citizens cannot currently change their government through democratic means and that the Indonesian government is authoritarian, they are reluctant to directly support the pro-democracy movement. For example, U.S. AID, which has on occasion given financial support to organizations in various countries supporting greater political freedoms, has refused to support KIPP. KIPP has thus far only received limited support from the U.S. government indirectly, primarily from the

population. Indeed, the noisy motorcades for the various parties were often composed many of the same young people who were offered the chance to ride their motorcycles without helmets, take off their mufflers, beat up passersby who didn't respond with the correct party hand signal, and generally raise hell.

Yet this so-called "festival of democracy" appears not to have been taken too seriously by the Indonesian people. Indeed, there is quite an irony in the fact that this elaborate public exercise designed to give greater credibility to the regime, may have done just the opposite. There was a widespread assumption that the elections were unfair and the level of cynicism was quite palpable. Since it led to the further mobilization of the population against the regime, perhaps the greatest irony may be that the elections did indeed advance the prospects for democracy in Indonesia.

Historically, the three main centers of power have been the Islamic movement, the military and the nationalist/Christian alliance. No one has been able to rule Indonesia without the support of all three. What made Suharto's 1965 coup palatable for most people was that the people were distressed that there seemed to be constant political bickering under Sukarno's rule that had prevented any attention to the economy, which was stagnating. Under Suharto, the economy has shown very impressive economic growth, which has actually been felt through virtually all levels of society. Indonesia is not like African or Latin

1949 and when Sukarno ended the country's democratic experiment in 1959, the peasants were militant. Now, they have been pacified through village-level organizations modeled after Japanese *tonaragumi*, imposed by Japanese occupation forces during the early 1940s. While many observers have noted how the rural system in Indonesia has certain feudalistic characteristics, at least serfs could live their own lives rather freely within the constructs of the system. In Indonesia, however, peasants' lives are controlled. Such organization follows the poor into their urban compounds, which even in large cities parallels the rural social structure, as well as the political control. A visitor who meets with liberal intellectual critics or those working for NGOs may get the mistaken impression that the country is only mildly authoritarian, given how freely these critics speak to foreigners. Yet, much of Indonesian society Suharto's New Order is, in fact, totalitarian and, in many respects, closely resembles fascism. Indeed, Suharto and a number of his generals were educated under the Japanese Imperialists (in contrast to Sukarno, who was educated under the Dutch) and have adopted aspects of the fascist movements of that era. Indeed, the very term "New Order" has its roots in Naziism. The government's priority is stability and development, not to address social problems. Ironically, stability and development will not be possible as long as the country's social ills are not addressed.

Self-censorship has become second nature for journalists and others, though more dissent comes through than it used to.

loyalty, few have given up on the nationalist cause and many are involved in underground pro-independence organizations. The government has often hired students from West Timor (historically part of Indonesia, but whose people are very similar in ethnic appearance) to engage in public demonstrations for integration and to even attack pro-independence East Timorese.

Some Indonesia pro-democracy activists resent all the international attention on East Timor. They are concerned that the oppression of 600,000 Timorese has gotten more attention that the oppression of 200 million Indonesians. Ironically, government development efforts in the former Portuguese colony designed to win the hearts and minds of the local population have made the Timorese economy somewhat better of than the other outlying regions. U.S. AID has poured money into East Timor as well, leading some critics to question whether the U.S. is also trying to make the occupation more palatable. There is a rather dramatic growth in awareness of the situation among pro-democracy activists in Indonesia, though the concern is often focused upon improving the human rights situation, not recognizing their right to self-determination. Many on the left, such as the PRD, openly support East Timorese independence. The PDI, Megawati and other nationalists criticize the repressive and over-centralized governance of the Suharto regime on East Timor, but still favor the country's integration into Indonesia. A case can be made, however, that freedom for East Timor and democracy for Indonesia are inextricably linked. Not only would a democratic Indonesia

Some have hopefully seen the overthrow of Marcos in the neighboring Philippines as a potential model. Despite the repressive nature of the Suharto regime, there are large numbers of NGOs organizing throughout the country, particularly in urban areas, creating a kind of grassroots democracy at the neighborhood level and within certain sectors of the population. They have engaged in efforts aimed towards popular empowerment, conscientization and raising awareness about the injustices of the political and economic system. There are aspects of Javanese culture which are consistent with Gandhian nonviolence. In addition, such mentors of the pro-democracy movement as Pramoedya, Indonesia's greatest living writer and former political prisoner, have openly advocated a "people power" revolution and there appears to be a strong appreciation among opposition leaders of the strategic and tactical advantages of nonviolent resistance. A new political culture appears to be evolving amidst the overbearing milieu of repression and corruption, particularly among the younger generation of students and others who have grown up under the feudalistic mindset of previous generations. The student movement for democracy is large and growing and, more significantly, much of the organizing continues after these students graduate in other sectors of Indonesian society.

However, there are a number of factors which make such a scenario unlikely in Indonesia in the near future. The development of a civil society is relatively new compared to the

that the Indonesians were not ready for the organization and nonviolent discipline to make it possible. Instead, he has made his goals far more modest, focusing on longterm grassroots work to pressure gradual reforms.

There is also an enormous amount of fear. While many of the core activists, such as the leadership of KIPP and mass organizations, have had enough exposure to jail to no longer be intimidated, many others, particularly the new generation of student activists, are far more reluctant. Not only is torture, disappearances and long jail sentences for nonviolent political offenses still common, there is also the memory of the slaughter of more than a half million left-wing activists in the mid-1960s, the terror which led the U.S. State Department to refer to Indonesia during this period as "the bright spot in Asia." Most of the fear today, however, is not as much over the prospects of massacre but of what is known as "death by bureaucracy"; so many day-to-day activities require official permission, it is not hard for the government to make life exceedingly difficult for those who choose to dissent.

The ousted PDI leadership is not ready for open defiance, but has distinguished between the illegal and illicit, that is, they are willing to defy the instructions of the government, but not the laws. Meanwhile, Megawati has refused to take on the mantle of leader of the pro-democracy movement. She has limited her objectives to retaining her leadership position in the PDI and working through (a future more open) electoral system. In

organization, will hear only praise for the government and the system and how any problems he may be experiencing are the fault of God, nature or himself. Any effort to create an alternative rural organization would be considered seditious. As a result, most dissent in the country is among urban intellectuals in Java, who can usually engage in critical discussions about the government without fear of retribution, as long as they don't actually attempt to organize people for change.

Indeed, perhaps the major role of NGOs working with the poor is to educate them as to why they are poor and to counter the hegemony of the official state ideology. This is not always easy; NGOs are required to comply with social organization laws which control their activities. They have to fill out reports in order to get the necessary licenses. As a result, NGOs have become circumspect in the wording of their activities. For example, they would never use the word "feminist" but instead say something about "enhancing the role of women in development"; instead of "empowerment", they would say "development education", etc. Still, most NGOs prefer to operate unofficially. Of the approximately 70 NGOs in Yogyakarta, for example, only six are formally recognized. They operate out of small offices with no sign out front. If shut down by the government, they will reopen the next day under a new name. Indeed, there are thousands of small informal NGOs operating throughout the country. Meetings of five or more people are required to be reported to the authorities, but such restrictions are usually ignored.

should be more open to the Chinese community within Indonesian society. Such relatively enlightened perspectives, however, has not stopped Muslim mobs from attacking and burning Chinese businesses, homes and houses of worship. Such targeting is not accidental. Leaders in the pro-democracy movement charge that a special unit of the armed forces exists to re-channel demonstrations towards these minority communities. A recent series of attacks against Christian churches in Java appears to have been too well-coordinated logistically to have been purely spontaneous.

Only 10% of the population is Christian, but -- given the sheer size of the country -- that still constitutes a larger Christian community than in Australia. They are disproportionately represented in the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia. The violence by Muslims works well for the government's Western supporters, who fear an upsurge of fundamentalist Islam comparable tot hose challenging Western interests in the Middle East. Most people familiar with Islam in Indonesia consider such a scenario highly unlikely due to the synchrotistic nature of Indonesian culture, which was well-established prior to Islam coming east. Yet, the alleged fundamentalist threat is used by the government, as they used to use the supposed threat of Communism in previous decades, as an excuse for suppressing dissent and for justifying to the United States and other Western countries, also concerned about the rise of political Islam, to tolerate the government's repression.

time, Pancasile without Suharto is clearly not enough to a people whose desire for freedom from corruption and repression is palpable throughout classes, regions and ethnic groups.

Another reason why a People Power revolution is unlikely in the immediate future is that there is no overarching moral authority comparable to the Filipino Catholic Church. Though there is a lot of training going on by KIPP and other NGOs on a variety of political activity on local, regional and even national level, there does not appear to be much awareness of the techniques and applications of nonviolent action. While KIPP, the pro-democracy and trade union movements, and most other NGOs and mass movements are firmly committed to nonviolence, this has not stopped the rioting and other outbreaks of violence for which the government has tried to blame the PRD, various NGOs and other democratic opponents, despite that some of the individuals named as instigators were already in jail. Indeed, KIPP has avoided participation in strikes or demonstrations altogether given the propensity of them to break down into violence and the resulting excuse it would give the government for repression. The democratic trade union movement has avoided involvement in the elections for the same reasons. The election-related violence that did occur appeared to be primarily that of spontaneous acts by young PPP supporters, often responding to Golkar provocations, and very possibly by government agents.

The opposition in not well-coordinated or well-organized, nor does there appear to be the strong leadership necessary to

rationalization for a strong and centralized government authority.

As a result, there have been recent efforts to downplay religious differences. The PPP understated its religious affiliation during the recent campaign due to the need for a coalition between religions since the collapse of the PDI's credibility. Meanwhile, the Council of Indonesian Bishops, in its episcopal circular, said that one could vote for any party or no party, based on one's conscience, which not only served as a tacit endorsement of those calling for a boycott, but implied their openness to Christians voting for the PPP as the only viable electoral alternative to Golkar, rather than the largely Christian-led but now discredited PDI. However, since efforts at building unity are largely explicit and pro-active, most such efforts have been led by intellectuals. The masses are still largely religiously-identified. Indeed, there are more religious divisions than previously. Intermarriage between those of different religions, for example, is no longer possible.

Whatever the nature of the PPP or their leadership, Islam is a powerful political vehicle with mass appeal. Yet, it is a vehicle, not an ideology. Everyone active in a Muslim organization with whom we talked stressed the inclusiveness and universalism or their cause and downplayed their Muslim identity. In part, giving their organization a Muslim label generally allows them more political space from government repression than if they were a secular opposition group. In addition, there is

government has an official human rights committee, consisting of representatives from various segments of the population ranging from government apologists to genuine critics and which has proven itself surprisingly independent if somewhat circumspect. They have made a number of recommendations in a series of reports challenging government policies which have been quoted in the media and are publicly available. They are generally ignored by the government, however, which has never enacted a proposed change in government regulations. As a result, they are limited to receiving complaints, monitoring abuses, and making recommendations. Government human rights offices have been set up throughout the country, but are not generally trusted by the people. For example, the human rights office in Dili, the capital of Indonesian-occupied East Timor, is right across the street from the police station, so the authorities can see who comes and goes. The one East Timorese member of the commission is openly pro-annexationist.

The Indonesian government only allows for one official trade union, which numbers around 12 million members. When activists tried to organized the SBSI in 1992 and quickly grew to 118,000 members, they were suppressed. Indeed, possession of an SBSI union card can be grounds for arrest. While calling for higher wages in not illegal per se, it is often labeled as incitement against the state. Their current leader, Muchtar Pakpahan, is jailed for sedition for allegedly being behind the July 1996 riots. The government has been unable to present any evidence to

called for Americans to campaign for his release, the recognition of his union, an end to the GSP, and a cessation of U.S. military training and arms transfers to the government.

Even the ethical reasons aside, the current political situation in Indonesia may be untenable. Despite hopes that Indonesia could be a potential economic powerhouse, the lack of commitment to education and building an infrastructure to uplift the majority of the population does not bode well for continued progress. For example, of the total workforce of 78 million, only eight-tenths of one percent of the workforce has a university degree. If one includes community colleges and technical schools, that total would increase by only seven-tenths of one percent. A full 77% of the workforce has only six years of formal education or less. It is rather dubious as to whether Indonesia can provide a capable workforce for serving modern industry. Indeed, their economic growth lags far behind South Korea and Taiwan, for example, which were at the same level of economic development as Indonesia when Suharto came to power, but are now far behind. Indonesia's education system lags far behind that of Malaysia, the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries with similar development goals. A whole generation has suffered from a poor education, as Suharto allowed the relatively good educational system inherited from the Dutch and expanded slightly under Sukarno to deteriorate. While the elite can generally afford to send their children to private schools or to

in order to force the changes needed.